

**RE: In Support of H 5436- Relating To Criminal Offenses - Rhode Island Assault Weapon Ban of 2025**

Chairman Craven, Vice Chairs McEntee and Knight, and members of the House Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share our support for H 5436- An Act Relating To Criminal Offenses - Assault Weapons and our thanks to Representative Knight and his esteemed co-sponsors for their introduction of this bill, which would restrict the manufacture, sale, purchase, and possession of these assault weapons.

The Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families (RICCF) is comprised of forty-four member organizations who provide and/or advocate for child well-being and family safety and stability. The services and resources provided by our members cross the full spectrum: behavioral health, education, juvenile justice, victim services, family stabilization, disability services, care for foster youth, shelter and housing and food and income supports. All the challenges facing our state's children, youth, and families are made more dangerous by the availability of assault weapons.

**A Public Health Emergency**

In summer 2024, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared firearms a public health emergency. Murthy told Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) Health News "the mental health toll of firearm violence is far more profound and pervasive than many of us recognize." He continued "every day that passes we lose more kids to gun violence...the more children who are witnessing episodes of gun violence, the more children who are shot and survive that are dealing with a lifetime of physical and mental health impacts."<sup>i</sup>

Firearms were responsible for 20 percent of all child and teen deaths in the U.S. for both 2020 and 2021, compared to an average of less than 2 percent in similarly large and wealthy nations. This puts the U.S. far ahead of peer nations in child and teen firearm deaths. Data show that U.S. firearm deaths for children and teens again surpassed motor vehicle deaths – the second leading cause of death – and that the increase has been primarily driven by gun assault deaths. On a per capita basis, the firearm mortality rate among children and teens in the U.S. is over 9.5 times the rate of Canada, the country with the second-highest child and teen firearm death rate. If firearm deaths in the U.S. had mirrored Canada's rates between 2010 and 2021, approximately 30,000 U.S. children and teenagers would still be alive.<sup>ii</sup>

**We join the American Academy of Pediatrics in supporting a ban on assault weapons.**

They note: "Assault weapons are dangerous, military-style guns that are built to do the most damage and kill or maim the maximum number of people in the shortest amount of time. Assault weapons are distinguishable from other semiautomatic firearms based on the combat-style features that allow a shooter to control the weapon, while quickly discharging large amounts of ammunition."<sup>iii</sup> The availability of such weapons in the community only exacerbates all of the dangers posed by other guns, including increasing child deaths, child suicide, and assaults.

**Assault weapons are especially dangerous for children:**

After a shooting in Nashville in 2023, doctors from Massachusetts General Hospital explained the particular danger of assault weapons for children "Children, their organs are a lot more compact, and they have a lot less fat surrounding their vital organs...a bullet that is causing a blast effect inside their body, inside their abdomen or their torso or their chest, it's not just going to explode, or tear apart, their lung, but also their heart. Not just going to completely shatter their liver, but also their spleen, causing catastrophic fatal bleeding....this has been seen in the multiple mass shootings that have occurred in schools across the U.S...When we see a child who has been shot with an AR-15-style rifle, there is often very little hope -- depending on where the bullet has hit them in their body -- that we can save their life even if they make it to the hospital."<sup>iv</sup>

**Finally, mass shootings, including school shootings, account for a small portion of firearm-related deaths, but negatively impact the mental health of children and communities at large.**

Again according to Kaiser, "research has found that youth antidepressant use and suicide risk increased in communities with exposures to school shootings. Additionally, a survey prior to the pandemic found that the majority of teenagers and their parents felt at least somewhat worried that a school shooting may occur at their school. In response to school shootings, nearly all schools practice active shooter drills. Some research suggests these drills have a negative psychological impact on participants. Although research is limited on how mass shootings affect individuals not directly exposed to them, current literature suggests that information and knowledge of mass shootings may be linked to increased levels of fear and anxiety."<sup>iii</sup>

For all of these reasons, we urge your support of H5436. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Tanja Kubas-Meyer  
Executive Director

<sup>i</sup> <https://kffhealthnews.org/news/article/gun-violence-us-surgeon-general-vivek-murthy-public-health-crisis/>

<sup>ii</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation retrieved from: <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/press-release/u-s-has-the-highest-rate-of-gun-deaths-for-children-and-teens-among-peer-countries>. 3.12.24

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/state-advocacy/assault-weapons-bans/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://abc7.com/why-ar15-semi-automatic-weapons-dangerous/13051721/>

<sup>v</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, op.cit.